

## CHAPTER 5

## SAFE DISTANCES AND PASSING

A driver who tailgates does not give himself enough time or distance to handle emergency situations. Running into the vehicle ahead happens often because many drivers do not allow a safe stopping distance between their vehicles and those in front of them. Safe passing requires that drivers know not only how to pass, but also when and when not to pass.

## MANAGING SPACE

To be a safe driver, you need space all around your vehicle. When things go wrong, space gives you time to think and act. To have space available when something goes wrong, you need to manage space. While this is true for all drivers, it is very important for large vehicles. They take up more space and require more space for stopping and turning.

Of all the space around your vehicle, the area ahead of the vehicle — the space you are driving into — is most important. You need space ahead in case you must suddenly stop. According to accident reports, trucks and buses most often run into the vehicle that is in front of them. The most frequent cause is following too closely. Remember, if the vehicle ahead of you is smaller than yours, it can probably stop faster than you can. This may cause you to crash into it if you are following too closely.

How much space should you keep in front of you? One good rule is to keep at least one second for each 10 feet of vehicle length at speeds below 40 MPH. At greater speeds, you must add one second for safety. For example, if you are driving at a speed below 40 MPH in a 40-foot vehicle, you should leave 4 seconds between you and the vehicle ahead; in a 60-foot vehicle, 6 seconds. If the 40-foot vehicle is moving faster than 40 MPH, you would need 5 seconds; for the 60-foot vehicle, 7 seconds.

To know how much space you have, wait until the vehicle ahead passes a shadow on the road, a pavement marking, or some other clear landmark. Then count off the seconds — one thousand and one, one thousand and two, and so on — until you reach the

same spot. Compare your count with the rule of one second for every 10 feet of length. If you are driving a 40-foot truck and only counted up to 2 seconds, you are too close. Drop back a little and count again until you have 4 seconds of following distance (or 5 seconds, if you are going faster than 40 MPH). After a little practice, you will know how far back you should drive. Also remember that when the road is slippery, you need more space to stop.

Specific following distances are determined for certain vehicles:

- When driving outside of cities and towns, a bus or truck should not travel closer than 200 feet behind another bus or truck.
- When a fire engine is answering an alarm, the minimum safe following distance is 500 feet. Violators can be prosecuted.

## NIGHT DRIVING

Headlights are a poor substitute for daylight. Never drive so fast that you cannot stop within the distance you can see ahead with your lights. At twilight, as soon as light begins to fade, turn on your headlights, not parking lights. To make your vehicle more visible to others, you must use headlights from sunset to sunrise according to most states. Be aware that some other drivers may not have turned on their lights. Use low beams when driving in cities and towns, except on streets where there is no other lighting. Use high-beam headlights on highways only when it is safe and legal to do so, such as when no other vehicle is coming toward you. Use low beams whenever you are following a vehicle. Switch to low beams whenever you meet oncoming traffic to avoid blinding the other driver. If the high beams of an oncoming car are not dimmed, avoid looking directly at the bright lights. Glance toward the side of the road; then quickly look ahead to determine the other vehicle's position. Keep doing this until you have passed each other. Drive defensively at night.

## PASSING

You must decide whether to pass or not to pass again and again every time you drive. Do not take chances. Do not move out into the left-hand lane as soon as you see any possibility of getting by the vehicle ahead. On the other hand, do not let opportunities for safe passing go by while irritably following a slow-moving vehicle for mile after mile.

### Safe Passing

Safe passing depends mainly on your knowing three things: when to pass, when not to pass, and how to pass. You cannot pass safely unless you can see far enough ahead to be sure that you can get back in line before you meet any traffic coming from the opposite direction. You must also be able to get back into line before meeting any traffic crossing or turning onto the road on which you are driving.

Give yourself and the driver of the vehicle you are passing plenty of room. Start to pass from a safe following distance. If the vehicle you want to pass is traveling at 30 MPH, start from at least 60 feet behind it. Drift over to the left and speed up quickly. Do not speed up directly behind a vehicle and then turn out suddenly just before you get to it. This interferes with your view of the road ahead. The other driver may slow down or stop, and he can do so much more quickly than you can because his speed is lower. If he does, you will almost certainly be unable to slow down or stop in time. If you try to avoid a collision by turning sharply aside, you may skid off the road, turn over, or smash into another vehicle.

As you go by another vehicle, be sure there is plenty of distance between the right side of your vehicle and the left side of the other vehicle. The law in most localities requires a minimum clearance of 2 feet.

You have not finished passing until you get back onto your own side of the road or in the lane where you belong, leaving the vehicle you have just passed at a safe following distance behind you. If the vehicle you are passing is traveling at 30 MPH, leave 60 feet clear before returning to your own side of the road (20 feet for every 10 MPH of speed). If you force the driver of the vehicle you have just passed to slow down as you get back into line, you have not passed safely. Of course, it is difficult to see the vehicle you have just passed and estimate the distance. A good

rule of thumb is that you can usually be sure it is safe to return to the right side of the road when you can see the vehicle you have passed in your rearview mirror.

As a general rule, do not attempt to pass more than one vehicle at a time. Passing several vehicles increases the danger because it increases the time you spend and the distance you cover while out of your own lane. If you come up behind a long line of vehicles, you can almost be sure that every driver except the first one is waiting for an opportunity to pass. The safe and courteous thing to do is to wait your turn. On the other hand, if you are next in line behind a slow-moving vehicle, it is discourteous to the drivers behind you not to pass when you have the opportunity.

### Unsafe Passing

There are some situations where passing is always dangerous or unlawful:

- On any curve or hill where you cannot see at least 500 feet ahead.
- At intersections and railway crossings.
- Whenever there is a single or double solid line between lanes or when your lane's side of a double line is solid.
- At crosswalks where a vehicle has stopped to allow a pedestrian to cross.
- Whenever a stopped school bus has its warning flashers on.
- Whenever you cannot see that the road is free of traffic far enough ahead to pass safely.

The last statement above sums up all the others and raises the question. How far ahead is far enough? This distance depends on your own speed, on the speed of the vehicle you are passing, and on the lengths of the vehicles involved. Suppose you want to pass a vehicle traveling at 30 MPH. You would have to travel whatever distance it travels while you are passing and an additional distance besides. Since the other vehicle's speed is 30 MPH, the additional distance in this case would be about 160 feet.

It is generally a good idea to pass at a speed at least 10 to 15 MPH faster than the speed of the vehicle being passed. If your speed is only 5 MPH faster, it will take you twice the time and almost twice the distance to completely pass the other vehicle.

On the other hand, there is no point in passing at too fast a speed. In passing at 20 MPH faster instead of 15 MPH faster than the speed of the vehicle being passed, the advantage amounts to only 1 or 2 seconds gained. It is usually offset by the danger of increased speed. If too much increased speed is required to pass and return to your lane, the wise decision is not to pass.

As a general rule, your passing speed should be from 10 to 15 MPH faster than the speed of the vehicle you are passing. Suppose, however, that you want to pass a vehicle traveling at 50 MPH when the speed limit is 55 MPH. In this case, driving your vehicle 10 to 15 MPH faster would be unlawful because passing is no excuse for exceeding the speed limit. Yet if you pass at 55 MPH, you will need 2,640 feet or exactly half a mile to pass the other vehicle. When the driver ahead of you is traveling just under the speed limit, the safest thing to do is forget about passing. Settle down behind him at a safe following distance. You may reach your destination a few minutes later than if you had attempted to pass, but at least you will not have broken the law.

**Passing on the Right.** Passing on the right, except as explained, is usually dangerous and unlawful. It puts you on the other driver's blind side. He may be intending to make a right turn or to pull over to the right side of the road. In either case, an accident is almost certain. There are, however, three situations in which passing on the right is permissible and reasonably safe:

- If the highway has at least two lanes going in each direction.
- If all lanes of traffic move in the same direction (one-way street).
- If the vehicle you are passing is in a left-turn lane.

**Passing On Three-Lane Highways.** Passing on a three-lane highway demands extra caution. Do not pass except in the center lane, and then only when the center lane is marked for passing in your direction.

The center lane may be so marked that it is open for passing in both directions. Before passing, make sure that none of the vehicles coming from the opposite direction are moving out to pass. Never use the center lane to pass if your view of the road ahead is obstructed by a hill or curve. The one exception to using only the center lane for passing is that you may pass in the right lane if the vehicle in the center lane is making a left turn.

## Signaling

When passing, do not just pull out and start around. Look ahead and behind to be sure it is safe to pass. Let the driver of the vehicle ahead know what you intend to do. He may be getting ready to pass the vehicle ahead of him or to turn left. Blow your horn as a signal to him. At night, give the driver ahead an additional signal by flashing your headlights from low to high beam and back to low. However, do not use the light signal as a substitute for the horn signal. The horn signal is required by law in most localities, and it puts the driver of the vehicle being passed under a legal obligation to help you pass.

The driver of the vehicle behind you also needs to know what you are going to do. He may be pulling out to pass you. Give a left-turn signal to let him know that you are about to pull out to pass.

## BEING PASSED

When you are being passed, the law requires you to help the other driver get by. When the driver of the passing vehicle blows his horn, you must do one thing: give way to the right. Even if you are already on your own side of the road, move over as close as safety will permit to the right-hand edge of the road. The law does not permit you to increase your speed. Speeding up forces the passing driver to cover more distance and take more time to get by you. It exposes both of you to unnecessary danger.

When you are being passed, it is usually safest to maintain a steady speed. By doing this, you allow the passing driver to judge passing distance with greater accuracy. If you slow down, you may mislead him into overestimating his speed. Nevertheless, if an attempt to pass you becomes dangerous, you may be able to make it safer for everyone by slowing down and allowing the passing vehicle to get back into the proper lane in less time and distance.

If, however, you see that a driver is trying to get back into line behind you, rather than ahead of you, do not slow down. In this case, it is much safer to speed

up a little to give him more room. When danger develops in passing, do not stand on your rights. Use all driving skill to avoid an accident.